The articles in this issue focus on the use of folklore in children’s literature. Their basic premise is that folktales are the cultural bedrock of a nation, but they consider questions like what were the origins of the tales? What were the elements from the original tale or versions thereof that were removed to make it presentable for children? Which of the tales continue to be popular through the ages; which were political in nature, originally, but were subsequently tempered down or simply lost their relevance as political parables, but survived since they were good stories? Does converting a story from an oral tradition to the written word change the fabric of the story? Does it make it more rigid, less flexible and hence impervious to any further adaptations as before? Are all folktales necessarily to be remodelled to make them suitable for children? We hope that debate on the yoking of folklore and children’s literature will continue.

Collecting Children -
The Schools’ Manuscripts Collections

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There is a scene in the well-known Disney film Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang where the “Child-catcher” trundles into town to gather-up any stray children who might be wandering the streets. He is, in effect, collecting children. In this instance, however, I am using the term “collecting children” to refer to children as collectors of folklore. In Ireland in 1937 a scheme was devised by the newly formed Folklore Commission to recruit the help of schoolchildren and their teachers in the task of collecting folklore. The Department of Education was brought on board and a circular was drafted entitled Circular to Managers and Teachers of National Schools: Scheme for the Collection and Preservation of Folklore and Oral Traditions. This outlined the working of the scheme and reads as follows:

Material collected by the pupils may be entered in their school jotters and the compositions written in their copybooks from that material. These compositions, or as much of them as is not unduly repeated, together with stories, songs, proverbs and other material collected, should be transcribed by selected pupils into the official Manuscript Books which were issued to all National Schools..... All Manuscript Books officially supplied... should be forwarded to this office at the end of the current school year – June 1938 – for immediate transmission to the Folklore commission. The composition copybooks, or a selected number of them, should also be forwarded to this Office.

And so, from this emerged what is now known as The Schools’ Manuscripts Collections. It consists of 1,128 bound and paginated volumes, in addition to an estimated 40,000 unbound original copybooks. The collecting scheme was carried out by children. 11-14 years of age, under the direction of their teachers, who followed specially prepared guidelines. Some 50,000 children took part and the scheme resulted in large amounts of folklore material being recorded, much of it from parts of the country not served by full-time or other collectors’.

The aforementioned guidelines were drafted by the Folklore Commission’s archivist, Seán Ó Súilleabháin, who had extensive experience of field-collecting, archiving and indexing procedures. In the guidelines, which appeared in booklet form entitled Irish Folklore and Tradition, Ó Súilleabháin lists fifty-five separate topics as “Subjects for Compositions”2, and outlined the questions the children might ask of their parents and neighbours about these local traditions. For instance, under the topic of “Old Story” the following suggestions were made:

Write down an old story as told by the elderly people while sitting round the fire on winter nights. It may be about a king or a queen or their children, or perhaps a widow’s son or a poor boy that set out from home to seek his fortune. It may be about a cruel stepmother who was very strict with her stepson or stepdaughter. It may be about Gobán Saor or the Bárrscloch or Conall Gulban or Cétaich or some such person about whom tales are told beside the fire. It may deal with magical helpers (The Man with His Ear to the Ground; The Man with His Leg tied under His Belt etc.) or with helpful horses or cats or with boats that go over land and sea. Or with soldiers killed in battle each day and were alive again next morning. If you know (or hear locally) a story that you know or are told has been “in print already” do not be deterred by this, but write it down, giving storyteller’s
name, age, and address. Even incomplete stories should be recorded. Try to discover from the storyteller where he (or she) got the story and when.

Ah, not a television nor computer game in sight! One would have to question whether this very idyllic picture of rural life in 1930s Ireland was in fact a reality. Did people really have time to sit down after a long hard day working on the farm and tell stories long into the night? Whether they did or not, the material poured into the Irish Folklore Commission’s offices in Dublin and when the scheme ended in January 1938, more than 20 Tons of copy-books and Manuscript Books had been amassed.

This invaluable collection is now housed and available for consultation in the UCD (University College Dublin) Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection.

Scanned image of the sample manuscript

Jack the Ball Player from Ireland.

Jack had no one but his father and mother. His father was a tailor and he was a dressmaker and they supported Jack. Jack worked none (sic.). His daily employment was playing ball and pegging stones at a maggie’s next in a big tall poplar.

He was out practising with his ball when there came up a well-dressed gentleman and bid “Good morning Jack”, “How is it” said Jack “that ye all know me? You are known all over the world”, replied the gentleman “for your good ball playing. Will you have three games with me? I am more than delighted sir, replied Jack, but before we begin the game, the Anglo-Irish I make with you if you beat me me Jack?” “I am more than delighted sir, replied Jack, “But before we begin the game, the bargain I make with you is if you beat me in any of the games any request you ask of me I will fulfill, and if I beat you, you have to do what I tell you”, said the gentleman. ……

There follows a long international folklore of wishes granted and impossible tasks imposed. Jack is sent on a quest to find a certain Lord Ureil in order to obtain his daughter’s hand in marriage. Jack’s failure will result in his beheading. He is helped along the way by supernatural helpers in the form of Swan Maidens. He reaches his destination eventually only to have three impossible tasks to complete, i.e. to clean out a shed with a fork – for every forkful of dirt thrown out, ten lots are thrown back in; to empty a well – every bucket emptied brings back ten and to catch a horse which is roaming a thousand acres and has not been seen for a century. With the help of his betrothed, he succeeds. The story continues with a tale of pursuit and enchantment and ends up with a marriage happy ever after.

This story was written by a school child in 1937 who collected it from an elderly neighbour who was then 78 years old. The teacher has written a comment at the end of the story, giving details of the lady in question and stating that “She is at present as smart and active in mind and limb as many young people under 30. She always worked very hard – never took sugar in tea – though she is a confirmed tea-drinker!”

Endnotes

1 Information taken from Proceedings from the McGlinchey Summer School 1998, article by Séamas Ó Catháin Scéim na Scoil.

2 The composition subjects listed were: Hidden Treasures; A Funny Story; A Collection of Riddles; Weather Lore; Local Heroes; Local Happenings; Severe Weather; Old Schools; Old Crafts; Local Marriage Customs; In the Penal Times; Local Place names; Bird Lore; Local Cures; Home-made Toys; Lore of Certain Days; Travelling Folk; Fairy Forts; Local Poets; Famine Times; Games I Play; The Local Roads; My Home District; Our Holy Wells; Herbs; The Potato Crop; Proverbs; Festival Customs; The Care of Our Farm Animals; Churning; The Care of the Feet; The Local Forge; Clothes Made Locally; Stories of the Holy Family; The Local Patron Saint; The Local Fairs; The Landlord; Food in Olden Times; Hurling and Football Matches; An Old Story; Old Irish Tales; A Song; Local Monuments; Bread; Buying and Selling; Old Houses; Stories of Giants and Warriors; The Leipreachtan or The Mermaid; Local Ruins; Religious Stories; The Old Graveyards; A Collection of Prayers; Emblems and Objects of Value; Historical Tradition; Strange Animals.